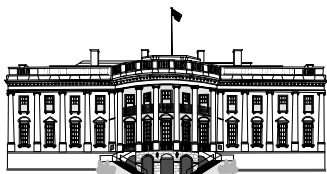


## The Role of Government in a Disaster



Government agencies play a critical role during times of disaster, but the exact role of government is often unclear to disaster victims. Even more difficult to decipher are the complex relationships between various government programs, from local to national levels. This document will attempt to make the roles and relationships a little more understandable.

### The Basic Scenario

In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, federal assistance is made available only after a formal request has been made by a state's governor. The extent or the impact of a natural or man-made event can qualify a region of a state to be declared a disaster. The President makes this declaration, and once made, it initiates the efforts of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, known as FEMA. FEMA reacts as quickly as possible to the devastation caused by a disaster to provide immediate aid and relief to those affected; this is known as the disaster response phase. After the disaster is over and it is time to rebuild, the recovery phase begins, and with it come additional sources of aid.

Now, we examine the elements of this scenario in more detail.

### Declarations of Emergency and Major Disaster Status

A state's governor orders a preliminary disaster report to be completed, usually after a disaster has struck. Once this report is finished, the governor can then request from the President a major disaster or emergency declaration for affected areas. This request can be transmitted as soon as it is obvious that the destruction is significant, often while a large scale weather event is still in progress.

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- Declaration of an Emergency—This allows the President to send supplementary funds to state and local efforts to save lives and protect property. Total assistance provided in a given declared emergency may not exceed five million dollars.
- Declaration of a Major Disaster—This declaration indicates that the disaster is of significant scope beyond the abilities of state government to manage on its own. Assistance is offered to both the public and private sectors. Once the declaration has been issued, the FEMA is authorized to engage the services of twelve federal departments, two agencies, one commission, one corporation, and one authority.

## Types of Assistance

A state governor may request three types of federal assistance:

- Individual Assistance  
For individuals, families, farmers, and businesses, in the form of loans, grants, emergency housing, tax relief and unemployment assistance.
- Public Assistance  
Funds for states, local communities and nonprofit groups to restore public systems and facilities.
- Matching Mitigation Funds  
For states and local communities, for projects which eliminate or reduce an area's vulnerability to a hazard.

Federal assistance for state and local governments may include the following: 1) provision of equipment, supplies, facilities and personnel; 2) technical assistance; 3) loans and sometimes grants.

Private nonprofit institutions that provide educational, utility, medical and other essential services are also eligible for federal aid. The federal government also provides matching "mitigation funds" to reconstruct buildings or utility systems to withstand future disasters.

## FEMA

FEMA is an independent federal agency with more than 2,600 full-time employees. These employees work at FEMA headquarters in Washington, D.C.; at regional and area offices across the country; at the Mount Weather Emergency Assistance Center; and at the

“In February 1996, FEMA’s director was granted presidential cabinet status.”



FEMA training center in Emmitsburg, Maryland. FEMA also has nearly 4,000 standby disaster assistance employees who are available to help after a disaster strikes.

Often FEMA works in partnership with other organizations which are part of the nation's emergency management system. Partners include state and local emergency management agencies, twenty-seven federal agencies, and the American Red Cross.

There are ten FEMA regional offices and two FEMA area offices. Each region serves several states. Regional staff work directly with states to plan for disasters, to develop mitigation programs, and to meet needs when major disasters occur.

The complete list of FEMA regional offices is given in the Resources section of Chapter 1.

### Response versus Recovery: A Critical Distinction

The kind of relief needed in an emergency depends very much on the immediate goal of the affected people. Their most immediate needs during or soon after the event are food, rescue, communications, etc. After the direct dangers of the disaster have passed, the focus of victims shifts to rebuilding. Therefore, relief agencies distinguish between Response and Recovery.

Response begins as soon as a disaster is detected or begins to threaten an area. Response involves mobilizing and positioning emergency equipment; getting people out of danger; providing needed food, water, shelter and medical services; and bringing damaged services and systems back on line. Local responders, government agencies and private organizations also take action. When destruction goes beyond local and state capabilities, federal help is needed.

Recovery is the task of rebuilding after a disaster. This can take months and even years to complete. The disaster may well affect the following areas: 1) community, regional and state services and infrastructure; 2) community, regional and state facilities and operations; and 3) the lives and livelihoods of many thousands of people.

During the recovery stage, federal loans and grants can help enormously. Recovery costs can be well beyond the capabilities of local and state governments to repair expensive water, sewage and other essential services. Loans and grants also help communities

rebuild homes, businesses and public facilities, clear debris, and repair roads and bridges.



## The Federal Response Plan

The Federal Response Plan implements the provisions of the Stafford Act (Public Law 93-288, as amended). This act defines the events that may be considered disasters, describes the basic mechanisms and structures through which federal aid and assistance will be provided, and outlines the coordination of various federal agencies to fulfill twelve Emergency Support Functions (ESF).

More specifically, the Stafford Act:



1. Identifies natural disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes and typhoons, tornados, and volcanic eruptions. Also applicable to technological emergencies such as radiological or hazardous material release or other incidents requiring federal assistance under the act.
2. Describes basic mechanisms and structures by which the federal government will mobilize resources and conduct activities. These efforts augment state and local responses.
3. Facilitates provision of the types of federal assistance a state is likely to need, based on twelve Emergency Support Functions (ESFs).

## Activating the Federal Response Plan

The Federal Response Plan begins to operate when a series of actions have been taken. Generally the process follows these steps:

1. Contact is made between the affected state and the FEMA regional office. This contact may take place prior to or immediately following a disaster.
2. If it appears that the situation is beyond state and local capacity, the state requests FEMA to conduct a joint Preliminary Damage Assessment, or PDA. Participants in the PDA include FEMA, state and local government representatives and other federal agencies.
3. Based on the PDA, the governor submits a request to the President through the FEMA regional director for either a

major disaster or an emergency declaration.

4. The FEMA regional office submits a summary of the disaster "event" along with a recommendation based on the results of the PDA. The summary and recommendation are submitted to FEMA headquarters, accompanied by the governor's request.

5. Once Headquarters receives these documents, senior staff meet to discuss the request and determine what recommendation they will make to the President.

6. FEMA's recommendation is forwarded to the White House for review.

7. The President declares a major disaster or an emergency.

Assistance is provided to the affected state via the Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO), appointed by the Director of FEMA on behalf of the President. The FCO is charged with overall coordination of federal assistance programs to affected regions.

## Emergency Support Functions

The twelve ESFs form the primary mechanism through which federal response assistance will be provided. Each ESF is headed by a primary agency selected based on its authorities, resources and capabilities. Other agencies are designated as support agencies for one or more ESF based on their resources and capabilities.

The Emergency Support Functions are:

1. Transportation  
Provides civilian and military transportation.  
Lead agency: Department of Transportation.
2. Communications  
Provides telecommunications support.  
Lead agency: National Communications System.
3. Public Works and Engineering  
Restores essential public services and facilities.  
Lead agency: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Department of Defense.

4. Fire Fighting  
Detects and suppresses wildland, rural and urban fires.  
Lead Agency: U.S. Forest Service, Department of Agriculture.
5. Information and Planning  
Collects, analyzes and disseminates critical information to facilitate the overall federal response and recovery operations.  
Lead agency: Federal Emergency Management Agency.
6. Mass Care  
Manages and coordinates food, shelter and first-aid for victims; provides bulk distribution of relief supplies; operates a system to assist family reunification.  
Lead agency: American Red Cross.
7. Resource Support  
Provides equipment, materials, supplies and personnel to federal entities during response operations.  
Lead agency: General Services Administration.
8. Health and Medical Services  
Provides assistance for public health and medical care needs.  
Lead agency: U.S. Public Health Service, Department of Health and Human Services.
9. Urban Search and Rescue  
Locates, extricates and provides initial medical treatment to victims trapped in collapsed structures.  
Lead agency: Federal Emergency Management Agency.
10. Hazardous Materials  
Supports federal response to actual or potential releases of oil and hazardous materials.  
Lead agency: Environmental Protection Agency.
11. Food  
Identifies food needs; ensures that food gets to affected areas.  
Lead agency: Food and Nutrition Service, Department of Agriculture.
12. Energy  
Restores power systems and fuel supplies.  
Lead agency: Department of Energy.